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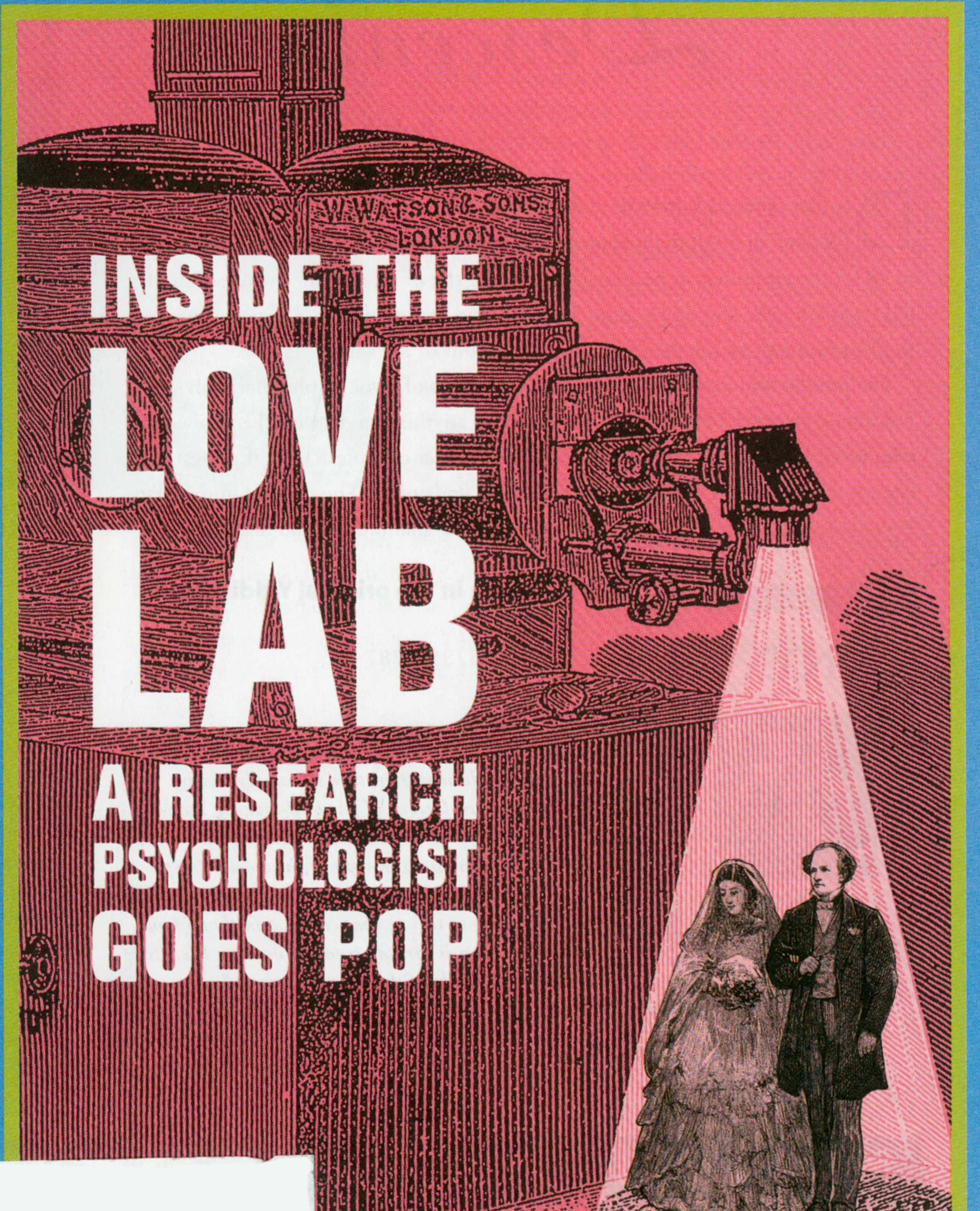

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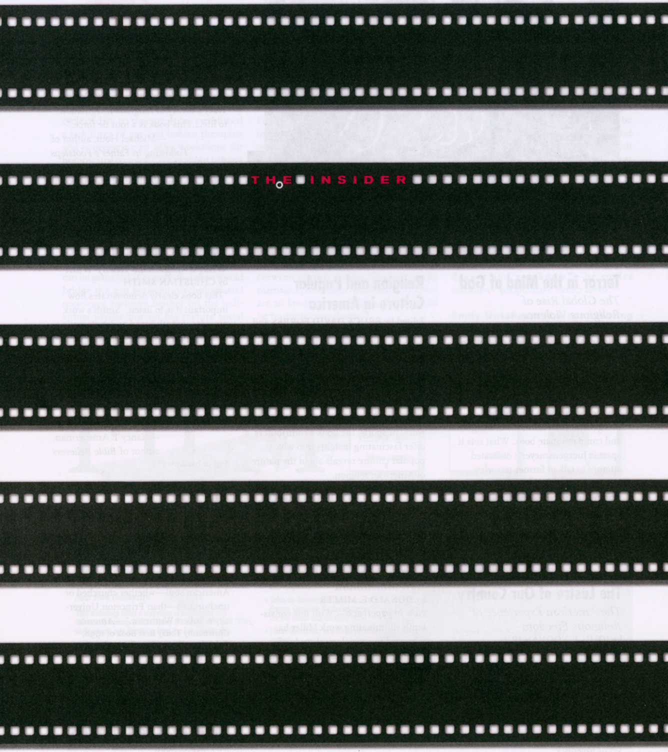

THE INSIDER

DAVID BORDWELL

BLOWS THE WHISTLE ON FILM STUDIES

BY ALISSA QUART

IN MARCH 1997, THE COLUMBIA FILM Seminars, a monthly gathering of cinema scholars, held an unusually incendiary meeting. The ruckus centered on a controversial new essay collection called *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Wisconsin, 1996), co-edited by University of Wisconsin film professors David Bordwell and Noël Carroll. *Post-Theory's* contributors took the film-studies Establishment to task, reserving their harshest words for the Lacanian-inflected psychoanalytic film theories that rest at the field's foundation. Declared Bordwell and Carroll in the book's introduction, "Decades of sedimented dogma need to be broken down and swept away and the spirit of critical thinking renewed."

Although the seminar was scheduled to have a "reasoned, open debate," says E. Ann Kaplan, a film professor at SUNY Stony Brook, the event quickly soured. "It got very vitriolic and blew up into a violent debate," she says. "Some thought it was a betrayal that any of the seminar's members had even read *Post-Theory*!" According to another scholar present, many seminar members were deeply upset by what they perceived as an attack on their work. So great was their anxiety that some scholars even took offense at *Post-Theory's* cover photo, in which Laurel and Hardy teach a class. Did Bordwell and Carroll consider their colleagues clowns?

BORDWELL CHAMPIONS THE MEDITATIVE STYLE OF DIRECTORS LIKE TERENCE
LIGHT BEFORE A FIXED CAMERA." BUT HE ALSO WRITES APPRECIATIVELY OF

Post-Theory could not be dismissed as empty provocation—after all, one of its editors cuts a particularly distinguished figure in the discipline. David Bordwell, whom the *Boston Phoenix* once called the "capo di tutti capi" of film studies, co-wrote the field's defining textbook, *Film Art*, in 1979, with his wife, film scholar Kristin Thompson. Bordwell's other books, eleven in all, run an impressive gamut, from meticulous studies of the great directors Carl Theodor Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein, and Yasujiro Ozu; to philosophically inflected treatises on the poetics of film and film criticism; to historical studies of staging techniques, shot composition, and the emergence of a distinct film style in the Hollywood studio system.

Ranging widely across the realms of analytic philosophy, cognitive science, and semiotics, some Bordwell essays barely mention a single film; others offer frame-by-frame readings so close that they resemble the line parsings of literature's New Criticism. But what unites them all is the fervent conviction that the true business of film scholars is to account for the craft of filmmaking and the experience of film viewing—and not to cull examples from the movies in order to illustrate sweeping theories of the human psyche or society. In an age when disciplinary boundaries are eroding, and aesthetic genres blurring, Bordwell and his allies call for a renewed belief in the purity of the medium. If film studies can't tell us what's distinctive about film, he wonders, why should it exist?

IN DIAGNOSING the trouble with cinema studies, Bordwell has referred—"acronymically and a little acrimoniously," he admits—to the field's dominating school of thought in the 1970s and 1980s as SLAB, or "Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory." Leading journals such as *Screen* and *Camera Obscura* often featured accounts of the positioning of subjects, the reproduction of ideology, and the fetishism of the gaze. Bordwell wishes to replace this theoretical multiplex with what he calls a "historical poetics" of film that would explain how movies "work and work upon us" in the most literal ways while also analyzing how those workings have changed over time. Such a return to formalist aesthetics may sound familiar to scholars in other disciplines, but Bordwell adds a twist: In much of his recent work, he also calls for a new, natural-science-oriented model of film analysis called cognitivism.

Rather than plumb films for their ideological or emotional undercurrents, cognitivists like Joe Anderson of Georgia State University and Carl Plantinga of Hollins University start from the premise that the viewer is a physiological and cognitive system, hardwired to respond to visual cues in particular ways. The cognitivist's task is to figure out how films activate such mechanisms, provoking viewers to make inferences not literally warranted by what they see on the screen: Why does a certain sequence of images—a man standing still, followed by a shot of him walking, followed by a shot of him standing still in another location—successfully convey, for instance, that a man has crossed a room?

Although most film scholars, including Bordwell, believe that the era of SLAB theory has come to a close, not everyone sees either cognitivism or formalism as the discipline's future. Can the study of the human eye really illuminate the bewitching power that a classic noir film such as *Double Indemnity* exerts over its audiences? Ella Shohat, a professor of film studies at CUNY

PREVIOUS PAGE: MICHAEL KIENITZ/ UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

and a postcolonial film theorist, is skeptical. She sees the cognitivists' ambitions as symptomatic of an underlying disciplinary identity crisis. "The cognitivists' desire to make film studies a science is a sign of the discipline's inferiority complex," she says.

Certainly, film studies is pervaded by such anxiety. With little received wisdom to go on, the field has rapidly absorbed nearly all of the humanities' recent theoretical trends. Indeed, at the base of Bordwell's critique seems to be the charge that in its haste to keep pace with popular culture and academic theory, film studies has withdrawn from the task of establishing its own turf as a realm of scholarly expertise. Says Bordwell, "We've failed to create an academic discipline, if you think of a discipline as having a core body of skills."

GROWING UP on a farm in upstate New York, David Bordwell was hardly at the cinematic vanguard. The only movies he saw were those that played on television, or the Disney movies that showed at the local theater. Such limited access did not stop him, however, from spending his teenage years reading about films in magazines like *Film Culture* and *Film Comment* or from spending his weekends making movies with his Super 8 camera. At age fifteen, he began reading the critical works of Sergei Eisenstein, Soviet Russia's premier film theorist and director; and he published his first academic essay in *Film Heritage* magazine in 1969. He was twenty-two, fresh out of college at SUNY Albany, and steeped in the writings of the critics Andrew Sarris and Robin Wood. Sarris and Wood, two early champions of auteurism, argued that film could be a personal form of visionary expression, like literature, with the director in the authorial role.

Bordwell's romance with the auteurists was quickly supplanted. By the time he entered the newly minted Ph.D. program in film studies at the University of Iowa, he had made the semiotic turn: Structuralism and Soviet neoformalism were the order of the day. "We [American film students] saw semiotics as rigorous then," he recalls. "If we understood what cinematic codes were saying, we thought we could also make claims about film's social impact. We needed to justify what we did without relying solely on the quality of the object." Rick Altman, who taught Bordwell at Iowa, remembers him as having "his feet stuck in the Russian and Czech formalist tradition." (Bordwell still cites the Soviet formalists of the 1920s, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Viktor Shklovsky, as among his primary intellectual progenitors.) Adds Altman, "He was extraordinary. It was clear then that he was going straight to the top."

DAVIES WHO DEPICT "BODIES SHIFTING DELICATELY THROUGH SPACE AND HONG KONG'S FAST-PACED, ACROBATIC ACTION FILMS.

In some respects, Bordwell's years at Iowa were paradigmatic of the era in film studies more generally. After all, Bordwell belonged to the first generation to earn Ph.D.'s in the fledgling discipline; graduate film-studies departments existed, at that time, only at Iowa, NYU, UCLA, Wisconsin, and USC. (To this day, no Ivy League school has a stand-alone film department.) Bordwell's cohort of graduate students in the 1970s didn't inherit a tradition of orthodox inquiry—and they didn't create one. Instead, they found the rigor they were missing in French structuralism. "In other humanities departments, there were crusty old right-wingers. In film studies, there weren't any," NYU film professor Robert Stam recalls.

Bordwell set his career course very early, publishing his first book, *Filmguide to "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc"* (Indiana, 1973), when he was twenty-six. That same year, he was offered a job at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he has remained ever since. After he met and married fellow neoformalist Kristin Thompson, the duo wrote the first of their two textbooks. "*Film Art* grew out of our teaching a basic film aesthetics course in the mid-1970s," says Bordwell. "We wrote it as a way to give students core knowledge of the film medium's techniques and the ways those techniques are used in different filmmaking traditions." Just as students of literature learn how to distinguish an iamb from a trochee, so Bordwell and Thompson instructed students on how to distinguish among, say, fades, dissolves, and wipes. According to its publisher, McGraw-Hill, *Film Art* has sold about a hundred thousand copies and is now tied for the title of best-selling film-studies book in the United States.

In the early and mid-1970s, like the auteurists before him, Bordwell mostly wrote on particular directors. But he dissected their work in search not of a director's signature style or a film's interior meaning—the main concern of Sarris et al.—but of the stylistic features of film more broadly. "After writing a book on Dreyer and articles on Eisenstein and Ozu, I began to understand that one could study mainstream film as a system of conventions," explains Bordwell. This led to his 1985 book, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin), which analyzed the norms of storytelling in movies. He examined, for example, how both Hollywood and Soviet filmmakers used jarringly unrealistic images or sounds to express a character's state of mind. This book also includes Bordwell's first investigation of cognitivism. "I was struck by how well it helped me understand the viewer's activity," he recalls.

Bordwell's 1989 book, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Harvard), applied his observations about film to film theory itself: One of the effects of a film, he noted, is "the urge to interpret it." The study in the end suggested that this urge was best resisted; after all, Bordwell remarks, "interpretation has become easy, but analysis is still hard."

Post-Theory built on these provocative claims. So did Bordwell's 1997 book *On the History of Film Style* (Harvard), in which he asserted that SLAB theory was inadequate to the "task of rethinking *stylistic* history." Calling for closer attention to the basic elements of film—"*mise en scène* (staging, lighting, performance, and setting); framing, focus, control of color values, and other aspects of cinematography; editing; and sound"—he insisted that "the audience gains access to story or theme only through that tissue of sensory materials."

As an example of his preferred approach, Bordwell concluded the study with a detailed history of the stylistic conventions governing "depth-staging," or the process by which directors use camera angles, lenses, and framing to express moods or establish tempo. Mainstream films, he asserted, have increasingly adopted a style of brash, fast-paced eclecticism typified by *Jaws* and *The Godfather:* "Long lenses for picturesque landscapes, for traffic and urban crowds, for stunts, for chases…wide-angle lenses for interior dialogue scenes, staged in moderate depth…camera movements that plunge into crowds and arc around central elements to establish depth; everything held together by rapid cutting—if there is a current professional norm of 35mm commercial film style… this synthesis is probably it." Echoing a familiar critical complaint, he comes down against such MTV-style rapidity. Bordwell writes that contemporary films "remind us of the cost of such flash and fluency. Speed hurtles past nuance; exhilaration in sheer motion misses minute gestures."

By contrast, he cites the more meditative approaches of the Greek director Theo Angelopoulos and the British director Terence Davies. These directors, Bordwell observes, resist the lure of "rapid editing" and incessant camera movement. In *Distant Voices, Still Lives,* Davies uses mug-shot-style images to evoke "'family portraits' over years of anguish." And in *Voyage to Cythera,* Angelopoulos's study of an aging Greek socialist's return to his village, the director "turns the drama from us, pushes it into the background, slips it into niches of the set, or slices it off by walls or doorways." Such works, Bordwell writes, exemplify an aesthetic of reticence: They "remind us that the viewer can be deeply engaged by exceptionally exact perceptions of bodies shifting delicately through space and light before a fixed camera."

Not that Bordwell lacks a taste for action-packed movies: His forthcoming book, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Harvard, May), offers an exuberant appreciation of the life and times of Hong Kong's highly commercial—and rapidly-cut—cinema. Some hints of cognitivism emerge, as when Bordwell muses on the possibility that the physicality of Hong Kong films, which are rife with gunfights, kung fu, and acrobatics, increases the viewer's emotional investment in the characters. But Bordwell also details the form's most kitschy conventions with a fan's, and a formalist's, delight:

> Hong Kong cinema relies shamelessly on the oldest contrivances of entertainment: eavesdropping, mistaken identity, confusion of twins or accidental lookalikes, wretchedly inadequate disguise…. If a woman dresses as a man, everyone takes her as one; when she returns to woman's costume, no one recognizes her resemblance to the man. When you are angry with your lover, you tear up his or her photo. In Hong Kong night is not black but blue, and terribly bright. Caucasians usually look large and Australian, and they speak English with an accent known nowhere on the planet.

LAST YEAR a reviewer noted that *On the History of Film Style* "will undoubtedly be attacked by those attacked within it (thankfully, I am not a target)." But despite the common perception of a man perpetually at odds with his peers, Bordwell does not see his role as that of disciplinary gadfly. At fifty-two, the Jacques Ledoux Professor of Film Studies seems oddly surprised that the pugnacity of his polemical writings—in *Post-Theory,* he gibes that psychoanalytic and culturalist theorists indulge in "associational reasoning" and that the "*maîtres à penser* bump into one another in the pages

BORDWELL BELIEVES THE CINEMATIC SHOT-REVERSE-SHOT SEQUENCE IS A HUMAN CONVERSATION. PLANTINGA NOTES THAT LENGTHY CLOSE-UPS ON

CULTURAL UNIVERSAL: IT MIMICS THE VISUAL GEOMETRY OF A CHARACTER'S FACE ARE LIKELY TO ELICIT EMPATHY FROM THE VIEWER.

of film books far more often than on the Boulevard St.-Michel"—has elicited such strong responses. Remembering when one of his early influences, Robin Wood, published an angry attack on *Making Meaning* in *Film Criticism* in 1989, Bordwell remarks that he felt like "the most criticized living film scholar." But criticism of his work, he complains, is often contradictory, vacillating between claims that his techniques are "aberrant" and that his work is "too central to the field."

The truth may be that his critics see him both ways. Says Altman, "David Bordwell's strongest critics admire the standards he's set." Avers Tom Gunning, a professor in the Cinema and Media Studies program at the University of Chicago, "I definitely think of David as the outstanding figure in the field, its superego. He relishes playing that role as people's conscience; he thinks of himself as a whistle-blower. It's rather scary, and it causes reactions he's surprised by."

STILL, many scholars feel that in his attacks on what he calls "one-size-fits-all theory," Bordwell was jousting with a straw man. Gunning notes that Grand Theory of the sort Bordwell criticizes had its heyday back in the 1970s: "Now there isn't any," he says. "It's like the end of Rome, and we're ready for the barbarians to come in, only there are no barbarians."

If any one tendency prevails in film studies today, says cognitivist Plantinga, it's "cultural studies, with an emphasis on reception and the sociology of spectatorship." Robert Stam, the author of *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (Duke, 1997), perhaps best summarizes the cultural-studies approach when he says that he envisions film scholarship as an inquiry that takes into account "social, cultural, racial, sexual difference" in answering such questions as, "Why does one audience applaud *Birth of a Nation* and another protest it? Why do people argue passionately about film? Why do they invest so much in it, fight over it? Why do I hate one film, while someone else loves it?"

Not everyone, however, believes the psychoanalytic empire has fallen so completely. Shohat says that although "Grand Theory is no longer as fashionable as it once was, it is still the most influential paradigm in terms of basic anthologies, theory courses, and publications."

In any event, as Bordwell sees it, the cultural-studies approach and the psychoanalytic approach have a lot in common. Theorists of both persuasions, he argues, appear to believe that an overarching worldview is necessary to film study. Psychoanalytic critics might emphasize how a film manipulates a viewer's subjectivity; cultural-studies types might emphasize how audiences use films to create their own subversive meanings. But in both cases, Bordwell contends, theorists begin with a grand theory and then extract supporting examples from the films they examine. The trouble with this methodology, which he calls "top-down inquiry," is that "just as one swallow doesn't make a summer, a lone case cannot establish a theory." And since a theory on the scale of psychoanalysis or Marxism cannot be proved or falsified anyway, Bordwell points out that top-down analysis frequently "spins out into mere appeal to authority."

By contrast, Bordwell believes that the study of film can proceed without an overarching theory of "existence, of social life, of mind and history." In *Post-Theory,* he argues for what he calls middle-level research, or scholarly inquiry on a modest scale that has both empirical and theoretical import: a study of the relation between African films and indigenous oral traditions, for example, or "a study of United Artists' business practices or the standardization of continuity editing." This sort of program will yield a true diversity of ideas and depth of knowledge—unlike the old "one-size-fits-all" theories, which tended to simply reproduce themselves.

As one might expect, the culturalist and psychoanalytic film scholars found this critique bruising. Gilberto Perez, a film professor at Sarah Lawrence, remembers one colleague at the Columbia Film Seminars meeting asking, "Why are these people being so hard on us?" Echoes E. Ann Kaplan, "What's in it for him to raise so many hackles?" But as painful as *Post-Theory* was, it was also a turning point. Concedes Kaplan, "I recognized the importance of a corrective to Lacanian-Althusserian film theory. [Bordwell and Carroll] pointed out the rigidity of our formulation, our lack of historical sensitivity." Nonetheless, Kaplan remarks, "I just don't experience the world the way Bordwell does."

IS BORDWELL the knight who will liberate film studies from Grand Theory—or does he, as a cognitivist, subscribe to a grand theory of his own? Perez observes that the few Lacanians and Althusserians remaining in the field "all talk about pluralism and diversity." He adds: "They give Bordwell and Carroll a hard time for being too narrow."

Bordwell and Carroll hasten to explain that cognitivism is not a theory at all but a stance. Like cognitive scientists, cognitivist film theorists range across a broad spectrum of research methods. What unites them—apart from, as Plantinga notes, "an antipathy to Freudians and Lacanians"—is an assumption that human beings broadly share certain habits of visual perception. "We were not born to watch movies," says cognitivist Joe Anderson. "We develop perceptual systems to perceive the world, and movies simply exploit them."

Cognitivists disagree on whether these perceptual systems are biologically ingrained, like a Chomskyan universal grammar of visual cues, or socially constructed at a very deep level and high cross-cultural frequency. Nonetheless, Bordwell notes, the study of visual perception and cognition does afford some nearly universal truths. For example, it is widely the case, across cultures, that people engage in conversation face-to-face. Hence the classic cinematic shot-reverse-shot sequence, in which each speaker in a conversation is filmed in turn over the shoulder of her interlocutor, mimics the visual geometry of conversation. As an aside, Bordwell also adduces experimental evidence that people recognize faces most easily at a three-quarters angle—the same angle adopted in an over-the-shoulder shot-reverse-shot sequence. Similarly, Plantinga notes that lengthy close-ups on a character's face—he cites a thirty-three-second shot of Holly Hunter's face in *The Piano*—are likely to elicit empathy from the viewer.

For Bordwell, cognitivism of this sort is a tool in the formalist arsenal. A poetics of film, he has argued, seeks to reveal the conventions that films use to achieve their effects—and cognitive explanations provide insight into how and why filmic conventions, like shot-reverse-shot or empathy close-ups, produce the effects they do.

Some cognitivists, however, are less interested in articulating a poetics of film than in examining physiological responses to particular cinematic episodes. One scholar offers the example of the opening scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which a rolling boulder threatens Indiana Jones. This sequence actually incites a stimulus-response pattern in spectators, as if the viewers were themselves preparing to run from an oncoming threat. A non-cognitivist film theorist might interpret the boulder as a symbol for something. But as another critic has suggested, for the cognitivists, the cigar of cinema is usually just a cigar.

So does Bordwell see cognitivism as the keystone of a new film studies? Not exactly, he says, though he wouldn't mind watching cognitivism duke it out with its rivals. In one article, "A Case for Cognitivism," which he published in the Iowa-based film journal *Iris* in 1989, Bordwell wrote: "The cognitive approach seems to me *at least* as enlightening as the theories of mind that have guided film studies in the recent past; indeed...it can explain things that other approaches cannot explain as well." In the spirit of pluralism, he ended that essay on a note that was intentionally uncertain: "All this could turn out to be wrongheaded and useless," he wrote.

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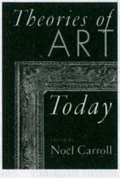

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EVEN BORDWELL'S critics stop far short of dismissing his approach as "wrongheaded and useless." But given all that films suggest about culture and the human psyche, many scholars feel that cinema's appeal to stimulus-response mechanisms and visual-cue following is one of its least interesting aspects. Remarks Robert Stam, "Cognitivists say that all viewers have the same perceptual apparatus. That's like saying we all defecate. So what?" Stam adds: "The danger of cognitivism is to reduce meaning, to see film reception as *only* perceptual and cognitive processes. The danger of the other side, that of Grand Theory in the Barthesian-Lacanian tradition, is perhaps the opposite, to inflate meaning."

FROM LEFT: PHOTOFEST (4)

"BORDWELL THINKS OF THE FILM VIEWER AS A COMPUTER. A NEUTERED CYBORG," COMPLAINS KAPLAN. "HE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT ITS GENDER OR ITS EMOTIONS OR ITS RACE."

Kaplan shares Stam's concern that cognitivism elides the depth and complexity of viewers' responses to film. "The spectator is a complicated entity, in terms of desire, fantasies, wishes, fears," Kaplan remarks. "Bordwell thinks of the film viewer as a computer, a neutered cyborg. He doesn't care about its gender or its emotions or its race. He cares only if it picks up the right cinematic cues. He sets himself a much easier task than what we do. But it's not that interesting."

Bordwell's views also meet some resistance among closer colleagues. According to Bordwell, Rick Altman notes, a poetics of film should account for how the genre's stylistic conventions have changed over time; but a central feature of his poetics is cognitivism, which starts from the presumption that the basic architecture of human perception remains constant. Bordwell would not, for instance, subscribe to the notion that shorter shot lengths in contemporary film reflect contemporary audiences' shorter attention spans.

Altman says Bordwell "takes it for granted that he is writing a history of what unchanging humans do with changing resources, whereas I would insist that changes in what humans do with their resources leads to changes in human cognition." Gunning concurs: "Habits of perception have changed over the last decade."

For his part, Bordwell reverses the charges of historical insensitivity. To argue that changes in cinematic style can be explained through changes in the nature of human cognition, he contends, is to claim that one "way of seeing" dominates each epoch. "It is very likely," he argues, "that a wide variety of perceptual abilities is at work in any given period." While he doubts the possibility of "short-term changes in perception, that intricate mess of hardwired anatomical, physiological, optical, and psychological mechanisms produced by millions of years of biological selection," he does think that different perceptual habits and skills gain prominence in response to the challenges of different eras.

BENEATH these quarrels lies a set of anxieties that has always haunted film studies: Is film high art or mass culture? What analytic tools should be brought to bear on a creative form so ripe for interpretation and analysis? With mounting intensity, scholars are posing questions about where the borders of this young discipline lie and how specialized one need be to teach film. And as scholarship on television and "new media" proliferates, film-studies scholars have suddenly become the Old Guard, fretting—and sometimes hoping—that they will be folded into programs on media studies, even new-media studies. NYU, home to one of the flagship departments in the field, has reportedly considered such a move.

A significant problem for film studies, its practitioners concur, is that professors in literature and other humanities departments have increasingly added films to their syllabi—perhaps to raise enrollments, or because film adds extra sparkle to a language class, or out of the belief that film is a text to be read like a novel. The trend has all camps in film studies concerned. Says Perez, "Film studies hasn't sufficiently established itself as its own discipline." He notes that it is "vulnerable" to being subsumed by other fields.

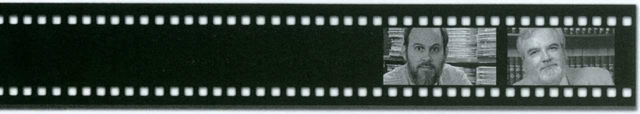
Indeed, Bordwell's poetics, whether historical or cognitivist, and his three sturdy textbooks on film history and syntax, are united by a single, often unstated, agenda: to establish a terra firma for film studies. "I'm trying to make film studies into a mature discipline," he explains. "People believe that film belongs to everyone in the humanities and that we in film studies are supposed to hold the doors open for lit professors to put *Blade Runner* and Baudrillard together and dub it a film course," he scoffs. "Well, there is such a thing as a film scholar. We've learned something in the thirty years we've existed." While he's careful to say he doesn't object to the notion of literary theorists teaching film—"mature disciplines always have room for brilliant people to come into the field and shake it up," he concedes—Bordwell believes that outsiders unschooled in film

"I'M TRYING TO MAKE FILM STUDIES INTO A MATURE DISCIPLINE," BORDWELL EXPLAINS. "THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A FILM SCHOLAR. WE'VE LEARNED SOMETHING IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS."

history should not presume to teach the subject. "It would be embarrassing for me to walk into a musicology class and say, 'I love music, I want to teach music,'" he says. "You have to do your homework."

Bordwell and Carroll often sound as if they feel themselves under siege within their discipline: "Sometimes I feel like I'm Galileo versus the Catholic Church," says Carroll with a touch of melodrama. But they insist their goal is to save film studies, not to destroy it. And perhaps for that reason, Bordwell's critics express admiration for his efforts as well as irritation with his truculence.

"I'm honored when David picks a fight with me because he's just so smart," offers Gunning. Anderson is more rhapsodic: "David Bordwell is the world's leading film scholar. He simply knows more about motion pictures and the phenomenon of cinema than any other living human being." Gunning says he believes that Bordwell has single-handedly elevated the look and the rigor of film-theory publications. While most film books are illustrated with still photos taken on the set, Bordwell care-



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fully backs up his claims by showing sleek frame enlargements from the films discussed. (He actually owns a portable frame-enlargement system. Thompson prints the images in the couple's basement.)

Bordwell is, in the words of Altman, "a man with a mission, an old-fashioned scholar who is after truth." This is one of the parts Bordwell plays in film studies. But the role he shines in is somewhat more contradictory: best-selling crown prince and irascible rebel at the same time.

Alissa Quart is a freelance writer living in New York. Her work has appeared in the London *Independent*, *Salon*, and *The Washington Post*, among other publications.

CLOSING CREDITS

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Voyage to Cythera (Theo Angelopoulos)
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Alexander Nevsky (Sergei Eisenstein)
This Was My Father's Crime (Haza ma Ghanahu Abi)
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Noël Carroll

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GUN PLAY

The arguments of Garry Wills and Michael Bellesiles against the individual-rights view of the Second Amendment seem contradictory ["Showdown," February]. Wills's big complaint seems to be that law-review articles aren't peer reviewed, even though his own writings on the Second Amendment have appeared in *The New York Review of Books* and in popularly published volumes, not in peer-reviewed journals. (At any rate, the authors of the articles that Wills dislikes—people of the stature of Laurence Tribe, William Van Alstyne, and Sanford Levinson—are certainly the ones who would be doing peer review were such the custom in legal scholarship.)

Bellesiles's views are equally odd. Even assuming that he is right about the relatively low level of gun ownership in Colonial times, it is unclear whether this tells us anything about the Second Amendment. After all, scholars like Jane Mansbridge and Michael Schudson point out that the percentage of eligible voters participating in town meetings during Colonial times was similarly small: Schudson says that in Concord, Massachusetts, town-meeting participation averaged 42 percent, while as few as 15 to 25 percent of adult male Bostonians bothered to vote. One hopes that Bellesiles would not argue that this low participation rate means that the framers of the Constitution did not believe in a right to vote.

Our present Constitution treats both voting and arms bearing as fundamental. The challenge now—as Benjamin Franklin famously predicted—will be to keep to the principles of freedom that the framers established, despite the revisionist efforts of Wills and Bellesiles.

GLENN HARLAN REYNOLDS
Professor of Law
University of Tennessee-Knoxville

FILM FEELING

Alissa Quart's essay on David Bordwell ["The Insider," March] is overall a fine account of the work of a most remarkable film scholar and his position within film studies. I was happy to be quoted in the piece, but nonetheless I'd like to correct certain inaccuracies. Quart writes that rather than "plumb films for their ideological or emotional undercurrents, cognitivists like...Carl Plantinga...start from the premise that the viewer is a physiological and cognitive system, hardwired to respond to visual cues in particular ways." With respect to my work, this is incorrect on two counts.

First, I do examine films for their ideological and emotional undercurrents, as a book I co-edited with Greg M. Smith, *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion,* makes clear. This book features the work of twelve scholars sympathetic to cognitivism, all of whom write about those emotional undercurrents Quart says I ignore. As a quick perusal of recent publications will attest, many cognitivists in film studies have an abiding interest in film-elicited emotion and in moral and ideological concerns.

Second, cognitivists come in many varieties, which is why we often call cognitivism an approach rather than a theory. Those who find cognitivism useful are not necessarily materialists or determinists. We do not all regard the film viewer as a "physiological and cognitive system," or an information processor without freedom of choice and impervious to the influences of culture and gender. In fact, although many cognitivists tend to emphasize universally human traits, cognitive theories can enable us to understand how culture and gender differences can influence emotional responses to films, for example. Cognitivism and cultural studies need not be opponents.

CARL PLANTINGA
Associate Professor of Film
Hollins University

In her article on David Bordwell, Alissa Quart states that "to this day, no Ivy League school has a stand-alone film department." While this is no doubt correct, an article ostensibly concerned with the direction of the field as a whole might have mentioned the Committee on Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, although it is deliberately *not* a freestanding unit. In 1998, the university established the degree-granting committee, which is now in its second year of admitting students into its Ph.D. program while also maintain-

continued on page 65

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continued from page 5

ing a flourishing undergraduate concentration.

We have friendly relations with David Bordwell and our other colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and respect their contributions to the field. And we insist that our students acquire a substantial knowledge of film history and a strong grounding in the methods and theories that have evolved with the field. But we believe that a forward-looking, intellectually vital program in cinema studies is more likely to thrive in a challenging interdisciplinary environment. (The committee's eleven faculty members, including veteran film scholars Tom Gunning and Yuri Tsivian as well as Laura Letinsky, have their primary appointments in fields such as art history, English, and Romance, Slavic, and Germanic studies.) The narrowly defined concept of discipline that underlies what was once called the "Madison project" is as problematic for film as it has been for decades in the more traditional humanities fields, if not more so. Besides, interdisciplinary study is a two-way street. The presence of a rigorous cinema studies program within traditional departments has already begun to have an impact on those disciplines, thus diminishing concerns over trespassing literature professors teaching film and television under the flag of cultural studies or visual culture.

At the very least, an interdisciplinary approach is mandated because the history of cinema cannot be separated from its interaction with other media. Any student who knows only about film knows little about film, let alone the culturally diverse and public formation that was, and continues to be, cinema.

MIRIAM HANSEN
Ferdinand Schevill
Distinguished Service Professor
in the Humanities
Department of English,
University of Chicago

CORRECTION

In "The Insider," we erroneously stated that Rick Altman supervised David Bordwell's graduate studies at the University of Iowa. The supervisor was Dudley Andrew.

NOTE

Lawyers for Ralph Schoenman have brought to our attention their client's concern that the article titled "Mr. Magee and the Evil Dwarf" [Field Notes, February] lent credence to charges about their client made by Brian Magee in his book *Confessions of a Philosopher.* After Mr. Schoenman filed a lawsuit in British court, Mr. Magee and his British publisher Orion agreed to retract the charges, and a full retraction was read in open court. Although we reported the court's decision and do not believe that the article reconfirmed the charges, we would like to make it clear that it was never our intention to lend credence to any of Mr. Magee's statements about Mr. Schoenman. It was our intention, rather, to report the facts of the case. Our readers are invited to consult the full text of the retractions made by Mr. Magee and the British publisher as stated in open court in the British High Court of Justice (Queen's Bench Division) at www.linguafranca.com.

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